

# Cloud 9 *Timely, innovative drama comes to Fredericton, and boy is it wierd*

If I told you that Cloud 9 was about homosexual and heterosexual relationships, incest, child molestation, rape, seduction, adultery, buggery and masturbation, you might want to go and see it for any number of reasons. Then again, if I told you it was about colonial oppression, racism, gender inequality, and archaic notions of child rearing and marriage, you might want to go and see it for any number of other reasons. Then again, if I told you that the cast is made up of women dressed as men in relationships with men dressed as women, men dressed as children, women dressed as children, white men dressed as black men, and lots of English stereotypes, I might even get the Playhouse crowd out to see it thinking it was yet another titty-bum British comedy. And if I told you the words fuck, cunt, and cock were in it a hundred times you might want to go and see it for yet another bunch of (albeit superficial) reasons. Cloud 9 has all of this, and whatever the reasons for going to see it, I guarantee it will make you squirm and jiggle with discomfort. That is its purpose after all.

A bizarre conglomeration of grotesque people involved in even more grotesque relationships, Cloud 9 digs a razor-sharp knife into your morality and twists and jerks that knife in the most unpleasant ways, leaving you bleeding and gasping, confused and violated, huddled in to a fetal ball desperately re-evaluating your own sexuality.

The play is presented in two rather distinct acts. Act I is set in British colonial Africa, circa 1911.

The audience is hit immediately with the grotesqueness of an exaggerated traditional English family, with all the appalling male-dominated rhetoric. A painfully humble and complacent Edith Bunker wife Betty (played by a man, Stephen Arnott), an effeminate, confused and oedipal young son Edward (played by a woman, Jennifer Kelly), a younger daughter, Victoria (played by a large and comically floppy doll), a matronly and traditional grandmother (Emily Johnson), a shy and emotional governess, Ellen (Jennifer Saunders), a quiet and reserved black servant, Joshua (played by a white man, Paul Palmer), and a dominating, loud and boisterous father Clive (Shawn Riedle) interact in Victorian farce; satire at an extreme level that bites at all that is distasteful yet comic in the not so distant past of Britain.

The play runs a course for a while developing these strangely disturbing characters, until the introduction of Harry Bagley (Kent E. Thompson), an explorer from up the river. Things which had simply raised some eyebrows and cocked a few heads suddenly snap as he turns to Joshua and says "Shall we go in a barn and fuck?" Everything crystallizes at this point for the viewer - crystallizes into something awful. A stark reality of real language and real history is suddenly nailed on to a surrealistic scene. This is what this play is about - to make you uncomfortable with a reality, but not. Suddenly everything on stage ceases to be comical - but does it? Nothing has changed in terms of dialogue, but

now you see the young boy in a sexual relationship with Bagley, the father in an adulterous relationship with a Mrs. Saunders from down the road (Jennifer House), the wife in a relationship with Bagley, Bagley as a homosexual (in an awkward and highly amusing scene where he misinterprets the fathers male fascist pig speech on women and their place as an indication that he is gay), and the governess as a lesbian who is deeply in love with the wife. Reversal after reversal, the characters (again, remember, playing opposite sex roles in many cases) suddenly become more and more confused with their own sexuality. Act I ends when, after finding out his parent's have been killed by the father in the burning down of his village, Joshua, drinking heavily, shoots Clive after Bagley has married the governess to save himself from the sin of homosexuality. Bizarre, satirical comedy with a sharp edge.

Act II is something completely different, yet linked with Act I in that the characters are obvious second generation products of the repressive Victorian society of Act I. Many names remain the same, but the only cross dressing is Cathy, a four year old girl, played by a full grown man (Shawn Riedle), creating both the bizarre and the highly comic. A painfully traditional (we think) mother, Betty (Jennifer Kelly), a confused, homosexual son, Edward (Stephen Arnott), his lover, Gerry (Paul Palmer), his sister, Victoria (Jennifer House) stuck in a marriage with a persecutively sensitive husband, Martin

(Kent E. Thompson), and Lin (Emily Johnson), the unwed lesbian mother of Cathy.

We realize vague connections with the first act in names and assume that Act II represents the product of the sexually repressed Victorian age in full bloom. Coming to grips with themselves sexually, all these character wrestle with what they are - they all seem to accept their rather grotesque orientations. The same concepts as were satirized in the first act are dealt with and placed in a modern, closer-to-home context here. Child rearing has been reversed to deal with a young girl who has a lesbian mother who gives her guns to play with and can't understand why she wants to be pretty and wear dresses all the time. Gerry leaves Edward because he is "becoming a wife" (literally, Edward at one point says he "thinks he is a lesbian" as he is fondling his sister's breasts wishing he had some), and Edward moves in with his sister and Lin, now her lesbian lover. The relationships are even more bizarre than in the first act, but solidify in an acceptance that is lacking in Act I.

Act II concludes with Betty accepting herself for what she is sexually, and there are echoes and voice-overs from Act one, presumably to make the connection more obvious for the audience.

This is (obviously) a play about sexuality. It is absolutely jammed with insinuation, innuendo, satire, caricature, and real humor. It demands discomfort, as well as reflection. Truly classic one-liners that sometimes have a nasty edge make watching this play like walking on bubble wrap. The full implications of just what this play is getting at are completely open to personal interpretation. One thing it excels at, however, is making the audience uncomfortable - uncomfortable with the relationships, uncomfortable with the language, and uncomfortable with the whole interaction of a misguided morality and exaggerated sexuality - "are you uncomfortable with a gay describing his six-minute blow job on a train?" It asks, "Good!" it says, and twists the knife a little more.

There are a few problems with the script. I think the connection between the two acts is a problem. Act 1 is set in 1911, while Act 2 is in 1980. The characters have the same names in many cases, and we continually hear comments about growing up in Africa, and are given snippets of speeches from the first act in the second, which are often awkward as connecting segments. Joshua, the real (for me anyway) symbol that characterizes the most repulsive portions of British colonialism, is lost in the second act, and we get no feel for a reflection of the evolution of the appalling racism of it all in the second act - where Joshua shooting Clive at the end of Act 1 is a definite ending statement, it is ignored for Act 2. There is also a rift between the two acts in presentation that can be confusing but might just be intentional. Act 1 is a farce; satire on a higher level, with a slapstick overtone. Act 2 suddenly introduces more thoughtful lighting, as well as monologues directed at the audience and a ghost scene - it can be confusing (but, again, this could easily be on purpose).

The one constant in the play that is not debatable is superb acting from a gutsy cast. Whatever this play tries to do, whatever it is saying, must be supported by sincere and convincing acting. It works, whatever it is. The ability of the cast to go from one bizarre character to another is quite astounding. Notable thanks to Shawn Riedle for a truly excellent performance as Cathy in the second act - wierd and intensely amusing stuff, especially when you consider his earlier performance as the chauvinist Clive. More amusing stuff from Stephen Arnott, whose two characters were the most alike of the bunch - a dominated and confused wife to a homosexual who is confused and wants to be dominated. One of the funniest speeches of the play for me was Kent Thompson's Martin delivering a rather sardonic speech about "putting pressure" on Victoria, and one of the most admirable performances came from Paul Palmer as Gerry, delivering his monologues. Jennifer Kelly astounded an audience with inspired performances as Edward, the effeminate son, and then as Betty in the second act - timing, poise, a dash of showmanship, wow. I liked Jennifer House's portrayal of the most sane



photos by David Smith

Joshua (Paul Palmer) informs Clive (Shawn Riedle) of Betty's infidelity



Harry Bagley (Kent Thompson), misunderstanding male bonding with Clive (Shawn Riedle)

characters - Ellen and Victoria, sensitive and forward. Emily Johnson made an excellent Lin, convincing and interesting; another complete role reversal from her straight-laced Maud of the first act.

A sparse stage, coupled with a lights-on, lights-off direction gave support to the surrealism of much of the play, and the costumes were just about exactly what should have been used.

Thank you Theatre St. Thomas, for a truly entertaining performance of a truly wierd and thought-provoking play. It will offend some people (it already has), but in the long run that's what it's for, isn't it?

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